

Abstract case in Lekuwa (Bantu C27)

Thierry MOWELE TSONO

Université Marien N'GOUABI

tmtmowelle@yahoo.fr

Abstract

This paper tackles the issue of the existence of abstract case in Lekuwa, a Bantu language of the group C20 spoken in the republic of Congo Brazzaville. Perez (1985) and Diercks (2012) claim that the absence of syntactic effects of Case Theory and morphological case in Bantu languages prove that they do not have abstract Case. This paper argues against this view and provides evidence of the existence of abstract Case in Bantu. This is mainly proved by syntactic effects of Case Theory borne out in Lekuwa.

Keywords: Case, Bantu, agreement, hyperactivity, copy raising constructions

Résumé

Cet article traite le problème de l'existence du cas abstrait en Lekuwa, une langue Bantu du groupe C20 parlée en république du Congo Brazzaville. Perez(1985) and Diercks (2012) prétendent que l'absence des effets syntaxiques du Cas abstrait et du cas morphologique justifie en Bantu l'absence du Cas abstrait. Cet article réfute ce point de vue en apportant des preuves sur l'existence du Cas abstrait en Bantu. Ceci est principalement prouvé par la présence en Lekuwa des effets syntaxiques prédits par la Théorie du Cas.

Mots clés : Cas, Bantu, accord, hyperactivité, constructions de mouvement

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate the existence of abstract Case in Lekuwa. In generative grammar all languages are assumed to have abstract Case even though they do not have morphological case. In that vein, ‘*abstract Case is a universal property*’ (Haegeman 1998:154) of all human languages; and the position of an NP in a sentence results from the need to check this universal feature. Unfortunately, Linguists like Perez (1985) and Diercks (2012) claim that Bantu languages lack abstract case because of the absence of morphological case (i.e.NPs appear in the same form whether they are a subject, a primary object, a secondary object, or an oblique position) and syntactic effects predicted by Case Theory in a number of constructions. This paper demonstrates that syntactic effects predicted by Case Theory are borne out in Lekuwa, a Bantu language of the groups C 20 spoken in the republic of Congo. This paper addresses the following questions: does abstract Case exist in Lekuwa? Is it sure that syntactic effects predicted by Case theory are borne out in Lekuwa? Are all syntactic effects of Case Theory displayed by languages which are assumed to have abstract Case?

This paper is structured as follows: section 2 introduces the Case Theory. Section3 concentrates on previous studies on Case-checking in Bantu. Section4 deals with abstract Case and its syntactic effects in Lekuwa. Section5 concludes the analysis.

2. Case Theory

In Government and Binding (GB), ‘*Case Theory deals with assignment of abstract Case and its morphological realization*’ (Chomsky1981b:6).

The word case stems from the Latin *casus* which means declension, inflection or ending. It refers to the morphological form expressing some relation that a noun, a pronoun, and an adjective may bear in a clause. In English, for example, the morphological shape of the third personal pronoun *he* varies when it occurs in object position as in (1b), while it does not in subject position as illustrated in (1a).

- (1) a. He went to a party last night
 b. John invited him to the party last night

However, in many Bantu languages like Lekuwa, personal pronouns do not have morphological case distinction, as exemplified in (2).

- (2) a. Ye a-békelá ngai lowí
 S/he SM NPST call I yesterday
 ‘S/he called me yesterday’
 b. Ngai na-békelá ye lowí
 I SM NPST call s/he yesterday
 ‘I called him/her yesterday’

The pronouns *ye* (s/he) in (2a) and *ngai* (I) in (2b) in subject position do not morphologically vary in object position in (2b) and (2a) respectively. This analysis is correct if only *ye* and *ngai* are considered to be true subject pronouns in Spec,TP and *a-* and *na-* are subject agreement markers (cf. Bresnan and Mchombo 1987); but as topics in Spec,CP or left dislocated elements (Cf. Bresnan and Mchombo 1987, Henderson 2006) they are assumed to be object pronouns, and so accusative forms of incorporated subject pronouns *a-* and *na-* respectively. In this case, (2a) will be translated as ‘*her/him, s/he called me yesterday.*’ Whether the later argument is accurate or not, abstract Case is not contingent to the existence of morphological case. In fact, the generative grammar in compliance with the uniformity of languages ability posited that case whether overt or covert does exist in all languages in all nominals at an abstract level of the theory of grammar. Thus any NP in sentence should have one of the two instances of abstract Case, nominative or accusative, and a sentence containing a phonological NP without case is ungrammatical. This ungrammaticality is ruled out in English either by inserting a preposition as *for* or *of* or by moving an NP in a case-less position to a position where it can be assigned case.

In Minimalist Program, abstract Case (i.e. nominative and accusative cases) is an uninterpretable feature of a nominal which must be checked and deleted in the course of the derivation. In English and other Indo-European languages, case and agreement are related. That

is, the probe T searches for a suitable goal in its c-command domain to get its uninterpretable phi-feature valued via agreement by the interpretable phi-features of the goal; while it values the uninterpretable case-feature of the goal.

Once the unvalued case features of a goal DP has been valued by the probe and the unvalued phi-features of the probe has been valued by the goal (i.e. the DP subject), the goal becomes inactive for further agree relation with another probe. Unfortunately, in Bantu languages, after this valuation the DP is still active for further agree relation with another probe. Consequently, linguists like Backer (1996), and Diercks (2012) argue that uninterpretable Case features are not present in Bantu languages; while others like Carstens (2005, 2011) and Van der Wall (2013) contend that it does.

3. Previous views about case-checking in Bantu

Perez (1985) observes that overt NPs and NPs-traces in Bantu languages, Shona (Zimbabwe), Kikuyu (Kenya) and Ki-ruúndi (Burundi), in raising data are case-marked as shown by the Shona example in (4), counter to GB predictions. Consequently, she concludes that case is not operative in these three Bantu languages, and movement of NP in a passive sentence and the preposition stranding in -a-phrases should not be accounted for by Case Theory, but by I-Theory (cf. Perez 1985).

(3) Mbavhai-no-fungirwa kuti [t_i] y-aka-vánd-á mú bako.

9Thief pres be suspected that 9 far past hide in cave

‘The thief is suspected to be hidden in the cave’ Perez (1985:28)

Perez claims that the movement of the subject *Mbavha* (thief) out of a finite embedded clause to the subject position of the matrix verb is due to the lack of morphological case in Bantu.

Following Perez (1985), Diercks (2012:254) argues that ‘*Bantu languages do not have uninterpretable Case features in their feature inventories*’. He puts forth the following arguments against the presence of case in Bantu languages and in favor of its parameterization:

First, he argues that abstract Case does not exist in Bantu languages because they do not exhibit any morphological case, as exemplified in

(2a). Second, he observes that overt NPs in Bantu are licensed by non-finite T in *possible* constructions as in (5), while Case-Theory requires that overt NPs should be selected by finite T as in (5a) or by a case-assigning complementizer (Cf. the English translation of ex.4).

Swahili

(4) I-na-wezakana (*kwa) Maiko ku-m-pig-i-a Tegani simu.

9S-PRS-possible (*for) 1Michael INF-1O-beat-APPL-FV 1Tegan
phone

‘It is possible for Michael to call Tegan.’

(Diercks2012:259)

(5) It seems that John is happy

For two reasons (4) is ungrammatical. First, the NP **Maiko** is the subject of a nonfinite clause, and then it is licensed without the case-marking licenser **kwa** (for) as required by Case Theory. Unfortunately, it is grammatical.

Third, he notes that the Case feature of the post-verbal NP subject is not checked in locative inversion in Bantu as in (6) below:

Ki-beembe

(6) Mu nzo mu-ri mu-ku-yímbilá báatu

17-9-house 17SM-be 17SM Inf. sing PRS Prog- 2person

‘In the house people are singing.’

In (6) the nominative case feature of the post-verbal subject **báatu** (persons) is not checked because the verb agrees with the locative phrase, rather with it. Thus, this sentence should also be ungrammatical according to Case Theory. Unfortunately, it is not.

Fourth, he points out that in Bantu subject NPs in compound tense constructions and in raising constructions continue to be syntactically active after their Case would have plausibly been checked as in (7) and (8).

Swahili

(7) Juma_i a- li -kuwa[t_i] a- me-pika chakula.

1Juma 1S-PST-be 1S-PRF-cook 7food

‘Juma had cooked food.’

(Carstens 2011: 723)

- (8) Michael_i a-lolekhana mbo[t_i] a-si-kona
 1Michael 1S-appears C 1S-PRS-sleep
 ‘Michael appears that he is still sleeping.’
 Diercks (2010:182)

The goal **Juma** in (7) after valuing the uninterpretable phi-feature of the probe **kuwa** (be) and having its uninterpretable case feature valued by it, the goal **Juma** must become inactive for further agree relation. However, it is still active and agrees with the past participle **–me-pika** (cooked), contra predictions of Case Theory.

The raising of the subject in (7) and (8) out the finite lower clause to the matrix clause violates the Case-Theory, which only allows NP raising out of a non-finite clause, as illustrated below:

- (9) a. *It seems that John to be happy
 b. John seems to be happy

Diercks (2012) argues that the aforementioned data provide strong evidence for the parameterizing of Case feature, as illustrated by the macro-parameter below:

- (12) **Case Parameter:** Uninterpretable Case features are/are not present in a language.
 (13) **Case Parameter, Bantu:** Uninterpretable Case features are not present.

However, in the footnote number one, Diercks (2012: 254) points out that ‘*such macroparameter claims must be tempered by allowing individual language differences*’. This implies that apart from the three Bantu languages studied by Diercks (2012), abstract case may be found in other Bantu languages, and this is the case of Lekuwa. Following Carstens (2001), Diercks (2012) suggests that what makes the goal active for agreement in Bantu is not Case feature, but rather gender feature; and agreement in gender does not correlate with Case-valuation in the same way that agreement in person does.

By contrast, Caratens (2001, 2011) admits that abstract Case exists in Bantu, even though it is not contingent on Case. She opines that this gender feature is uninterpretable as required by the Activity requirement formulated by Chomsky (2001):

(14) The Activity Requirement: each participant in an Agree relation must have an unchecked uninterpretable feature.

Carstens claims that gender (i.e. noun class system) in Bantu is then an uninterpretable and valued feature (=uGen), whereas Case is an uninterpretable, unvalued feature. Gender is understood as uninterpretable because it lacks consistent meaning. Agree relation can take the uGen feature as goal; but cannot deactivate it because it enters the derivation already valued. Therefore, after an aspectual head (Asp) agrees with a subject, T can still take the subject as goal.

According to Carstens (2001) the uninterpretable phi-features of the two verbs in Bantu compound tense constructions is coupled with the EPP feature. That is, the checking of ϕ -features also necessitates the checking of EPP features, and so effectively linking agreement and movement in Bantu.

Van der Wal (2013), by contrast, argues that although Bantu languages do not show any type of case morphology with a function comparable to the case system found in Latin, German or Turkish; they could still have abstract Case, and according to Case Theory, they have Case. He contends that in Makhuwa and Matengo, two Bantu languages of Mozambique, the verb does not agree with the preverbal locative, but must seek agreement with the post-verbal subject (Cf Van der Wal 2013:6).

With respect to Diercks' (2012) third argument, he argues that NPs in Makhuwa and Matengo does not occur in caseless position, and subject raising predicates do not exist in these languages. As for Diercks' fourth argument, he claims that complex tenses with multiple agreement in Makhuwa and Matengo are different from what Carstens (2005, 2011) discusses, because the second verb in a complex tense construction is very often an infinitive or a durative situative verb form (Cf. Van der Wal 2013:17).

Following Carstens (2005, 2011), Van der Wal suggests that multiple agreement in Makhuwa and Matengo could be accounted for by [Gender] as the activity feature, and Case is relevant for NPs licensing.

4. Abstract Case in Lekuwa

This section focuses on abstract Case in Lekuwa. Based on the presence of the syntactic effects

predicted by abstract Case found in copy raising constructions in Lekuwa, the existence of [P animate, -human]pronouns which only occur in object positions, it shows that abstract Case exists in Bantu.

4.1 Morphological case in Lekuwa

This subsection looks first at [$\pm$ animate, -human] object pronouns in Lekuwa. If the nature of free pronouns like *ngai* (I or me), *bisu* (we or us) etc. is controversial, [$\pm$ animate, -human] object pronouns can be undoubtedly said to have objective or accusative case. In fact, pronominalized NPs referring to things or animals in many Bantu languages have morphological form which can only occur in object position, as the following Lekuwa sentences show :

- 16) a. Le-ngoló le-sotá
 5mango AM NPST fall
 ‘The mango has fallen’
- b. Mbulá e-sot-is-á le-ngu
 9 rain SM NPST fall Caus.FV it
 ‘The rain has made it fall’

The subject *le-ngoló* in (16a) is replaced by the accusative pronoun *le-ngu* (it) in (16b). This type of pronouns only occurs in object position, as shown by the ungrammaticality they yield in subject position:

- 17) * Le-ngu le-sotá
 5it SM fall NPST
 ‘it has fallen’

The fact that Lekuwa has [$\pm$ animate, -human] pronouns which only occur in object position suggests that it has accusative case, and it should absolutely have nominative cases, since they are both morphological realizations of abstract Case. This entails that Lekuwa abstract Case. Consequently, Diercks (2012)’s first argument against the presence of case in Bantu is inconsistent. In the following section, I shall look at Diercks’s second argument.

4.2 Syntactic effects predicted by abstract Case in Lekuwa

Case Theory predicts that overt NPs cannot be licensed by non-finite T, NPs and their traces should not be case-marked and an NP with

valued Nominative Case feature ceases to be active. This subsection addresses the question whether these syntactic effects are borne out in Lekuwa.

In Lekuwa there is no *possible* constructions in which overt NPs are selected by non-finite T. Overt NP in such constructions are always licensed by finite T, as illustrated below:

(18) a. E-yis-a o-kel-um-á yéte Moweles a-bondó békela Moseli
 It can INF. do-St. PRS. that Moweles SM will call Moseli
 ‘It can be done that Moweles will call Moseli/ It is possible that Moweles will call Moseli’

b.* E-yis-a o-kél-um-a Moweles o-bondó békela Moseli
 It can INF do-St. PRS. Moweles INF. will call Moseli
 ‘It can be done that Moweles will call Moseli/ It is possible that Moweles will call Moseli’

Like in English, an NP in Lekuwa as a subject of a non-finite clause is ungrammatical as shown in (18b). An NP can appear in such a configuration if it is selected by a Case-liscenser, as the complementizer *mp *n* (for), as illustrated in (19).

(19)
 a. Moweles mpona o-yel-is-a nyangú o-ye ye a-yisá o-sókita
 Moweles for INF please-CAUS FV 9mother Gen M-he he SM
 must PRES INF toil
 ‘For Moweles to please his mother he must work hard’

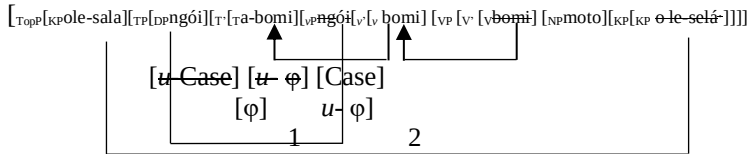
b.* Moweles o- yel- is- a nyangú o-ye ye a- yisá o-sókita
 Moweles INF please-CAUS FV mother Gen M-he he SM must
 PRES INF toil
 * ‘Moweles to please his mother he must work hard’

Second, Unlike in Ki-beembe where the topicalized NP controls the agreement with the verb in locative inversion constructions as seen in (7) above, in Lekuwa it does not. It is rather controlled by the subject NP, which does not move to a post-verbal position, as exemplified below:

- 20) O-le-salá ngói a-bóm-i mo-tó
 Loc 5 field leopard SM kill RPST 1person
 ‘In the field a leopard killed someone’

In locative inversion constructions in Lekuwa, before the topicalization of the locative phrase (KP), the subject DP raises from SpecvP to SpecTP to get its uninterpretable Case-feature checked and valued as nominative by the interpretable case-feature of T; while the uninterpretable phi-feature on T is valued by the interpretable feature of the subject. At the same time, [u-Case] feature on the subject and the [u- ϕ] features on T are deleted, as shown in a simplified way in (21).

(21)



Third, raising constructions that Carstens (2011), Diercks (2012), and Halpert (2013) use as their main arguments against the presence of abstract Case in Bantu, are constructions copy-raising constructions as Diercks (2012)’s example in (8b) above and Carstens’ first translation in bold in the following example show:

Lusaamia

- (22) Efula yi-bonekhana i-na-kwa muchiri.
 9rain 9SM-appear 9SM-FUT-fall tomorrow
‘It seems that it will rain tomorrow’
 ‘Rain seems will fall tomorrow. OK to say upon reading the forecast.’
 Carstens (2011: 727)

In such constructions the subject NP of the embedded clause is overt in English as well as in Bantu languages. Compare:

English

- (23) John looks as if he knows her

- (24) Mbesi a-bon-um-a b×ti ye a-yew· ye
 Mbesi SM see-St.PRS that s/he SM know PRS her
 ‘Mbesi looks as if he knows her/him’

Lekuwa

The subject **ye** (s/he) of the embedded clause and the complementizer **bíti** (that) in (24) can be dropped as shown in (25); and so yielding a sentence like (23).

- (25) ? Mbesi a-bon-um-a a-yewá ye
 Mbesi SM see-St PRS SM know her
 ‘Mbesi appears that he knows her/him’

It follows from the above examples (24-25) that the subject *Mbesi* has not raised from a Case-checking position in a lower clause to the subject position, and the subject of the embedded clauses in (25) is not PRO, but rather *pro*. By contrast with subject raising constructions in which the subject is base-generated in the Spec,TP of the embedded clause, the subject of a copy raising construction is base-generated in the Spec,TP of the matrix clause.

Moreover, the complementizer in English must be dropped in raising constructions when the subject raises to the specifier position of the matrix clause, whereas in Bantu copy raising constructions the complementizer is optionally dropped and it re-emerges in the translation. Compare the following examples:

- (26) a. It seems that John has bought a new car
 b. John seems to have bought a new car
 c. * John seems that to have bought a new car
 (27) a. E-bón-um-a bítí Mbesi a-somb bwatu
 Expl see St PRS that Mbesi SM buy NPST 14 canoe
 ‘It seems that Mbesi has bought a canoe’
 b. Mbesi a-bón-um-a bítí a-somb bwatu
 Mbesi see St PRS that Mbesi SM buy NPST 14 canoe
 ‘Mbesi appears that he has bought a canoe’
 c. ? Mbesi a-bón-um-a a-somb bwatu
 Mbesi see St PRS Mbesi SM buy NPST 14 canoe
 ‘Mbesi looks as if he has bought a canoe’

The sentence (27c) cannot be translated as *Mbesi seems/ appears to have bought a canoe*, but rather *Mbesi looks as if he has bought a canoe*. The first translation is impossible because subject raising constructions do not exist in Bantu languages; and verbs of perception like *seem* or *appear* cannot license PRO in embedded clauses as in

(26b) above. Thus, NPs in Lekuwa do not move out of a case-marked position and their traces are case-marked as predicted by Case Theory.

Finally, with respect to compound tense structures with hyperactive goal, they do exist in Lekuwa, as shown in (28).

- (28) Biokó Enianga a-líkí a-lambá
8 food Enianga SM be NPST SM cook
'The food that Enianga has cooked'

The foregoing data have demonstrated on the one hand that overt NPs are not selected by non-finite T, NPs and their traces are not case-marked in Lekuwa; in the other hand they confirm that preverbal subjects in compound tense constructions are hyperactive. The first syntactic effects show that the uninterpretable Case features exist in Lekuwa, while the second syntactic effects point out to the contrary. Can the existence of abstract Case in Lekuwa be questioned by this second group of syntactic effects prohibited by Case Theory? The answer to this question is no, since a language like French, which is assumed to have abstract Case, has existential constructions in which post-verbal subjects do not agree with their verbs as in (29) and compound tense constructions with hyperactive subject NPs as in (30).

- (29) Il arrive des événements pénibles
There arrive the events painful
'There arrive painful events'

The NP subject in (30) agrees in number with the auxiliary and then in number and gender with the participle.

- (30) a. Elles sont tombées.

The NP *elles* (they F.) values the uninterpretable number feature of the auxiliary *être* (be), while it likely values its uninterpretable case feature. At this level of the derivation, the number feature of the NP *elles* (they F.) should be inactive. Unfortunately, it is still active, since it values the number and gender features of the participle *tombé* (fallen), which is ultimately spelled out in the phonology with the feminine gender morpheme *e* and the plural morpheme *s*. Like in Bantu languages, the subject of a compound tense construction in French is hyperactive.

In spite of the fact that the post-verbal subject of existential constructions does not agree with its verb and the NP subject of

compound tense constructions in French is hyperactive, French is still considered as a language which has abstract Case. Thus, the absence of agreement between the post-verbal subject and the verb in locative inversion and the hyperactivity of subject NPs in CT constructions in some Bantu languages cannot prevent them from having abstract Case.

Conclusion

In this paper I have addressed the question of the existence of abstract Case in Lekuwa. The existence of uninterpretable case features or abstract Case in Lekuwa has been evidenced by the following facts:

- Lekuwa has [$\pm$ animate,-human] object pronouns which only occur in object position,
- Overt NPs in Lekuwa are not licensed by non-finite T, they are always subcategorized by case-licensors,
- Subject in locative inversion construction in Lekuwa always agrees with its verb, and
- Subject raising constructions with an embedded case-marked *PRO* do not exist in Lekuwa.

However, it has also been demonstrated that the subject in object relative clauses in Lekuwa is hyperactive in preverbal position. This syntactic effect contrasts with the Case Theory's prediction that states that once the uninterpretable phi-features of a goal are valued it ceases to be active for further agreement. This hyperactivity of the goal in Lekuwa can deny it the abstract Case. Fortunately it cannot be so, since syntactic effects prohibited by Case Theory are also observed in French, a language which are assumed to have uninterpretable case features. Instead of the presence of post-verbal subjects which do not agree with their verbs and hyperactive NPs in compound tense constructions in French, it is still credited with abstract Case. Consequently Lekuwa should also have abstract Case, instead of the hyperactivity of its goal in object relative clauses. Thus, the universality of Case Theory cannot be questioned because of the particular aspects of abstract Case among different languages. They are just parameters of abstract Case.

References

- BAKER, Mark. 2008b. *The syntax of agreement and concord*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- CARSTENS.2008. 'DP in Bantu and Romance'. In De Cat, Cécile and Katherine Demuth.*The Bantu-Romance Connection: a comparative investigation of verbal agreement, DPs, and information structure*. John Benjamins (Linguistik Aktuell/Linguistics Today 131), Amsterdam, pp. 131-166.
- CARSTENS. 2011. 'Hyperactivity and hyperagreement in Bantu'. *Lingua* 121.5: 721-741
- CHOMSKY, N. 1981b. Lectures on Government and Binding, The Pisa Lectures. Foris Publications.
- DIERCKS, Michael. 2010. *Agreement with Subject in Lubukusu*. Unpublishedc Doctoral Dissertation, Georgetown University. Washington, DC
- DIERCKS, Michael. 2012. 'Parameterizing Case: Evidence from Bantu'. *Syntax*. 15:3, 253-286
- HAEGEMAN, L. 1994. *Introduction to Government and Binding Theory*. Blackwell Publishers Ltd Oxford UK and Cambridge USA
- PEREZ, C.H. 1985. *Aspects of Complementation in three Bantu languages*. University of Wisconsin-Madison. Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation.
- VAN Der WAL, Jenneke. 2012. 'Parameterising Case: other evidence from Bantu.' African Linguistics workshop, LSA Summer Institute, Ann Arbor. jennekevanderwal@gmail.com. Retrieved on June 28th 2016